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Crosfield, Arthur Henry

Rational hours of work

[Westminster]

[1913]

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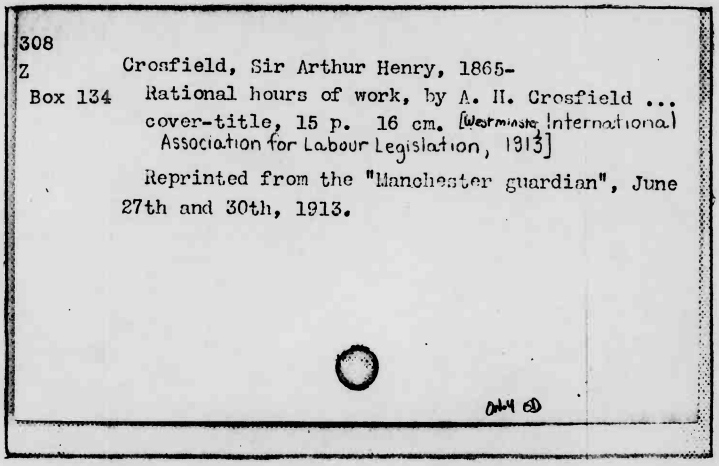
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Crosfield, Sir Arthur Henry, 1865-
Rational hours of work, by A. H. Crosfield ...
cover-title, 15 p. 16 cm. [Westminster: International Association for Labour Legislation, 1913]
Reprinted from the "Manchester guardian", June 27th and 30th, 1913.

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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

FILM SIZE: 35mm REDUCTION RATIO: 9:1 IMAGE PLACEMENT: IA (IIA) IB IIB

DATE FILMED: 3-25-97 INITIALS: MB

TRACKING # : 22718

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Rational Hours of Work

BY

A. H. CROSFIELD

PRICE - - - - 1d.

Reprinted from the "MANCHESTER GUARDIAN,"
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RATIONAL HOURS OF WORK.

I.

THE CASE FOR REDUCTION.

SHORTER HOURS & GREATER EFFICIENCY.

BY A. H. CROSFIELD.

While increased cost of living has made the concurrent increase in rates of wages a very burning question, the cognate and in many industries equally urgent question of hours of labour has not yet received all the attention due to it. And very erroneous ideas about the supposed connection between long hours of labour and substantial returns upon invested capital are still very frequently to be met with, notwithstanding the fact that the stupidity of obliging either men or women to undergo excessively long hours of labour has, in so many cases, been conclusively proved.

To take only one or two well-known examples, there is, for instance, the very important, and now historic, experiment of Sir William (then Mr.) Mather in 1892. In

the course of his report on his year's trial of the 48-hour week he said: "The true means for larger production is increased producing power in men and machinery. . . . The most economical production is obtained by employing men only so long as they are at their best. When this stage is passed, there is no true economy in their continued work." As the work in this case was not continuous (*i.e.*, was not carried on night and day right through the 24 hours) a reduction in the hours of work meant a substantial reduction in the hours during which machinery and plant were kept in use. The success of such an experiment from a commercial point of view is therefore testimony of the very highest value.

Then there is the memorable undertaking of Ernst Abbe at the Carl Zeiss Optical Works at Jena. Abbe reduced the daily hours gradually in the course of twenty years from twelve hours to nine. In 1899 he introduced the eight-hour day, keeping careful record of the work done. The result was striking. In the year when the men were working on the eight-hour day they earned by piece-work about 3 per cent more on the average than they had earned at the same rates the previous year when the nine-hour day was in force. Abbe tells us that the men themselves were for the most part unaware that they had made any extra effort, and were surprised to find their earnings increased. This excellent result was obtained for work very varied in character and differing widely in the amount of skill required. In these days, when speeding-up may—if carried too far—lead to overstrain, the fact that the men themselves were not conscious of any increased expenditure of energy and effort is significant and illumina-

ting, and goes to show that there is nothing to be feared from alert, intelligent work within reasonable hours. The advantages of such a system, both from the point of view of the employees and from that of the capitalist, have also been strikingly demonstrated by the well-known firm of Brunner, Mond, and Co., who were pioneers of the eight-hours movement.

The Steel Trade.

Even more striking is the splendid progress which the eight-hour day has made throughout the steel trade, especially in the steel sheet and tinplate trades of South Wales. Mr. John Hodge, M.P., general secretary of the British Steel Smelters' Association, recently gave the International Association for Labour Legislation an interesting account of the adoption by Mr. Herbert Eccles of the eight-hour shift for his open-hearth plant at Briton Ferry. The eight-hour day was adopted there for men engaged on various classes of work, and for the lower-paid men Mr. Eccles made a concession of extra wages involving an estimated extra expenditure of £586 per annum. Within less than two years of the introduction of the system Mr. Eccles was so convinced of its advantages that it was adopted for every single employee throughout his entire works. Conferences followed with the rest of the employers in the steel trade of South Wales, and the eight-hour day became the established rule in the industry, and is now by general admission a real and very substantial advantage both to employers and employed. With regard to the economic results, Mr. Hodge says, as a

result of many conversations with them on the subject, that "managers in South Wales are agreed that, generally speaking, there has been an increase of output in the rolling mills of at least 20 per cent, but so far as the open-hearth melting process is concerned they would not place the increase of output at more than 12½ per cent." Mr. Hodge then quoted the opinion of Mr. Eccles to the effect that "if there had been no greater gain than reform of the habits of some of the men the change was worth it," the substance of his remarks being that it had made "bad men good and good men better."

Here, then, we have industrial undertakings on a very large scale which afford us striking practical evidence of enormous importance of the advantages of rational hours of work considered from every point of view, whether physical, ethical, or commercial. And this practical testimony is just what scientific investigation leads us to anticipate. For instance, experiments have shown that a muscle which is overworked requires to restore it to a state of efficiency twice as much rest as a muscle which is given rest at the proper time, before exhaustion has set in. Then again, those who have studied the results of both systems are familiar with the fact that where men are working the longer hours there is a much more serious risk of accidents than there is in the case of firms who have adopted the eight-hour day. Scientific inquiry affords us further confirmation of indisputable practical experience when we are reminded that over-exertion or exhaustion weakens the power of vision and thus proves another direct cause of accident. Without pursuing the scientific evidence on such a question any further here, I may refer the reader who cares to study it in detail to the very comprehensive work on "Fatigue and Efficiency" by Miss Josephine Goldmark.*

Some Disastrous Effects.

If we turn now to consider the disastrous physical, mental, and moral effects of excessively long hours and exhausting conditions of work on men and women in their family and civic life, the most eloquent testimony against these evil conditions of work undoubtedly comes from those who have experienced and suffered under them. The evidence against excessive hours of work—which in point of fact not seldom becomes positively inhuman—is of course overwhelming. I may perhaps be permitted to give one illustration. Alderman Patrick Walls, general secretary of the National Union of Blastfurnacemen, has described to me his experience of sixteen years' work on twelve-hour shifts. 72 hours one week and 96 the next, making an average of 84 hours a week (inclusive of meal-time). When two gangs of men work at a continuous process such as blast furnaces, once a fortnight 24 hours' continuous work is necessary for one gang, in order that the men may change from day to the night shift or *vice versa*. Mr. Walls as a young man in his prime must have been a fine specimen of a powerful, athletic Briton. Yet he told me that, walking home at the end of that 24-hour shift, he used to feel as if a straw in his path would throw him on his face. So much for the physical effects of such iniquitously long hours of work. It represents a strain such as no man would dream of putting on his horse.

* Published by the Charities Publication Committee, 105, East 22nd Street, New York, U.S.A.

From the mental point of view, what interest can a man exhausted by these long hours and this excessive strain be expected to take in study, culture, public life, and so forth? It is to be noticed that the conversation of men who become in this way mere working machines tends to turn with weary repetition entirely upon the monotonous details of daily routine. As for morality, can anyone doubt the inevitably brutalising effects of such conditions? Many men no doubt succeed, even under these harsh and trying circumstances, in maintaining the dignity and credit of British citizens. But is it any wonder that others too often prove unable to resist such demoralising influences, sinking back into sensuality and drunkenness as the only kind of change and respite from a life of toil which they are capable of enjoying? Certainly conditions of this character, and those who are responsible for them, wherever they exist, deserve the stern and unsparing condemnation of public opinion. And, amazing though the fact is, it is none the less an absolute fact that these barbarous conditions of employment do still exist even at this time of day, and in some instances are in force on a large scale. There is the case of the blastfurnaces in the United Kingdom, where out of some 15,000 shift workers about 7,000 who find their employment in certain parts of Scotland, South Wales, South Derbyshire, and Northamptonshire are still working the twelve-hour shift. How little that is a matter of necessity is proved by the fact that the other 8,000, working in the North of England, already enjoy the advantages of the eight-hour shift.

"But," readers of this article may say,

"why labour the question? No argument is needed where everyone—at least everyone whose support is worth having—is agreed as to the overwhelming case for abolishing excessive hours of labour, wherever that is practicable. Tell us what you have to say about those cases in which shorter hours are *not* practicable, or at least where they involve an increase in cost of production which is serious, and in effect regarded as an insurmountable obstacle. Do you argue that shorter hours can be everywhere introduced and, for instance, an eight-hour day substituted for a twelve-hour day without any increase in cost of manufacture?" No, I certainly do not. No rule can be laid down as to the extent to which improved quality, or increased quantity, and regularity of work, or a reduction of accidents and of waste, or all these factors taken together would be a partial or a complete set-off to otherwise increased cost of output, or, as not infrequently happens, considerably outweigh the latter. On the contrary, there will obviously be infinite variety in the results attained, and we must consider those cases where the shorter hours, which it is the purpose of these articles to advocate, may involve some appreciable increase in the total cost of production, and where foreign competition is an element that has to be reckoned with. This aspect of the problem will be dealt with in a second article.

II.

EIGHT-HOUR SHIFTS IN IRON AND STEEL TRADES.

WHY NOT INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT?

BY A. H. CROSFIELD.

In an earlier article we considered the advantages of rational hours of work and reached the question and the difficulty which have to be faced where a substantial reduction of working hours leads to any considerable increase in cost of production. Where that is the position in any industry there is obviously at once a strong case for (a) putting manufacturers on a level footing in any country where such reforms are to be carried out, by giving them legal sanction from a given date throughout the country, and (b) making a similar attempt to equalise matters between countries that compete with each other in any industry by arranging that such changes should take effect at the same, or as nearly as possible the same, time in each of the countries concerned.

In other words, there is a strong and pressing case for international co-operation. By means of international conventions concluded at conferences summoned at the instigation (and thanks to the initiative and energy) of the International Association for Labour Legislation, very valuable reforms have already been carried out in the in-

dustrial world. The almost entire abolition of the night-work of women in Europe has been a great achievement, and the prohibition of the use of white phosphorous in the manufacture of matches, saving the workers from the horrible disease called "phossy-jaw," is another industrial reform fit to rank with it. What is to prevent us from proceeding with this vast question of hours of work on similar lines? Is it not high time that a combined and determined effort were made to get rid of the system of excessive hours of labour with all the evil consequences it entails? The International Association for Labour Legislation answers that question emphatically in the affirmative, and is of opinion that progress will best be made by concentrating effort in the first instance upon those industries which present the strongest case for a reduction of hours of work, and where there is the greatest common measure of agreement among reformers. Holding that opinion, members of the Association are unanimously agreed that it is in the continuous industries that this reform is most urgently needed, and of these the iron and steel trade is unquestionably in the forefront, and presents the strongest possible case for prompt action.

An International Meeting.

A Special Committee of the International Association* was convened in London to deal exclusively with this question last summer. It was attended by representatives of the national sections of the Association and of the Governments of nearly every industrial

* The report of this Conference can be procured from the British Section of the Association, Queen Anne's Chambers, Westminster. Price 6d.

nation in Europe, while a representative of the United States was also present. At that conference the following resolutions were passed:—

(a) In view of the facts which have been placed before the Commission, we are of opinion that the eight-hour shift in continuous industries (industries working night and day) is the best shift system for such work, and should be strongly recommended both from the point of view of the physical and moral welfare of the workers, and in the social and economic interests of society generally.

(b) The special reports presented by the different national sections have shown that in the iron and steel industries the eight-hour day is very necessary and is practicable.

(c) The Commission asks the international association to address to the Governments as soon as possible the request to arrange a conference of the interested States, with a view to arriving at an international agreement as to the introduction of the eight-hour day in these industries.

These resolutions were in turn substantially confirmed at the biennial conference of the entire Association in Zurich last September.

At the present time the eight-hour day in the iron and steel trade is unknown in Belgium, and practically unknown in France. In Germany less than 2 per cent of the workers have the benefit of this system, while in the United States conditions of labour in this industry are still extremely bad. But the United States Congress has recently enacted a law establishing an eight-hour day for all work done on Government contracts. The iron and steel trade will be specially concerned, and it remains to be seen whether this measure will not ultimately force the entire industry to adopt the eight-hour shift. With public opinion running strongly in the same direction, the law may, in fact, revolutionise

working hours in the iron and steel industry of the United States. The immense influence such a change would have upon hours of labour throughout the entire country cannot for a moment be doubted.

In Great Britain.

It is, however, in the iron and steel trade of Britain that the eight-hour day has first really taken hold, as it is also nowadays fast making headway. Changes of such magnitude cannot, of course, be made in a moment. It takes years to bring them into operation on any large scale in the different branches of a great industry like the iron and steel trade. To quote again from the speech delivered by Mr. J. Hodge, M.P., to the special Conference of the International Association, he says, in reference to the adoption of the eight-hour day in the steel trade of South Wales:—

We quite realised that by enforcing it slowly it would give an opportunity for men to be trained and thus do away with any danger of the change leading to incompetency. Our whole aim was to have the change brought about without penalising the employer in any shape or form.

Making all the necessary allowances for such steady and well-ordered progress, it is virtually certain that before many years have passed the eight-hour day will be the rule in the iron and steel trade wherever those industries are carried on in Britain. But it is also admitted that this beneficent change would be the more easily and the more speedily effected if progress on similar lines were being made concurrently on the Continent of Europe and in America. Is it, then, too much to hope that our captains of

industry in the iron and steel trade may be willing to lend the weight of their great authority in support of such an international movement?

There is another consideration of paramount importance that must weigh heavily in the mind of every responsible and far-sighted employer of labour; I mean the direct and permanent influence which such a reform when carried must have in promoting industrial peace. While it is admittedly true enough that the question of wages has been an essential cause of the upheaval in the labour world which we have witnessed recently in Great Britain, and while it is unfortunately only too true that the process of levelling up wages which has recently been in operation was delayed a good deal longer than was either wise or right; nevertheless wages are by no manner of means the sole cause of that industrial unrest. To a far wider extent than most people at all realise, unfair, injurious, and evil conditions of labour are a paramount cause of bitter discontent among our industrial population. As an example of this, take the case of the strike of the spelter workers which occurred at Swansea last November. This was not in any way caused by differences about wages. It was a question of conditions of employment. The work is very hard, hot, and injurious to health. There is no stoppage of work at the week-end, because the manufacture is absolutely continuous, and, while the number of hours per week vary, the average of working hours week by week is 70 per man. The complaint of the men, to quote their own language, is that they are "sapped out, prematurely aged, made miserable by chronic poisoning, and crushed by

unnatural fatigue." Their offer was to sacrifice one-seventh of their wages in return for the concession of Sunday rest! Readers of the "Manchester Guardian" will agree with me that it is both deplorable and shocking that such an offer as this should have been either necessary or possible. As if the employers in that industry ought not long ago to have anticipated any such request by setting their commercial house in better order.

The East End Bakers.

Then the other day there was the case of the bakers in the East End of London. There also one of the chief complaints of the operatives was the abnormal length of their hours of work. An official of the Amalgamated Union of Operative Bakers declared in an interview that it was not at all uncommon for a baker to work 100 hours a week and 25 consecutive hours at the week-end. In this case the object of the agitation was to secure both shorter hours and better pay; but here, again, the question of shorter hours was of paramount importance. Their far-reaching influence upon the entire home life of the family is always to be borne in mind, and then what about the duties of the citizen? We are faced at the present moment with a shortage of recruits for the Territorials. Can anyone doubt that the establishment of a more rational relation, in the industrial world, between hours of work and hours of leisure would powerfully assist recruiting, and would certainly tend to wipe out that deficit and give us not only an ample supply of men for our Territorial Force, but better men into the bargain?

This country already provides more voluntary service of one kind and another than any other nation in the world. We are fast approaching a time when there will be a stigma resting upon everyone who, having the leisure and opportunity, refuses in one way or another to render some measure of service—and there are a hundred and one ways in which national service, whether of a military or civilian character, may be given—to his country. But this is not less a question of opportunity than of duty. And surely, therefore, it is high time we all realised that it is not only extremely short-sighted and selfish, but the very negation of patriotism to deprive employees of the opportunity and the right to play their part as capable citizens of the country and live the all-round life of the modern civilised man? And if it be argued that employers of labour as a whole will refuse to make any sacrifices in order to establish these wiser and healthier conditions of life, the answer is that happily such a statement would be a gross and unfounded libel where so many honourable examples to the contrary already exist.

We have pointed out that while the eight-hour shift is making great progress in the iron and steel trade of this country, yet, inasmuch as in some cases shorter hours of work may more or less increase cost of production, at all events for a time, it is admitted that the movement would be accelerated if the same improved conditions of employment were, *pari passu*, making headway abroad. And this is just where British employers can, if they will, render invaluable and lasting service to the whole world of industry. If employers in the iron and steel trade make it clear that they would

approve of the adoption by international agreement of an eight-hour day for the shift workers in that industry, they will immediately give an impetus to the whole reform movement of the greatest value. Our captains of industry can, if they will, hasten by years the date when, by an International Convention, a reform may be put in force the advantage of which to workers in England, and in every other industrial nation, it would be simply impossible to exaggerate, and one which, carried out on those international lines, could not fail to be welcome to employers themselves.

When that day comes the claims of the datal workers will either be adjusted simultaneously, or will be similarly dealt with afterwards; and other continuous industries will infallibly follow suit. Nor will the movement end there. Improved standards of labour in continuous industries will bring about similar improvement in others which are not continuous, until in the end the movement will extend throughout the whole field of industry. Can anyone question, does anyone doubt, its influence on industrial unrest? Do our leaders in the iron and steel trade doubt it? Or will they not whole-heartedly throw in the weight of their authority in support of a movement so certain to promote content, efficiency, and stability? If they will but give this national—and international—lead, how priceless is their opportunity. They can show the way to the industrial world as no other industry is in a position to show it. They can help to reform the conditions and the environment of industrial life in a way that will be a lasting honour to the pioneers of the movement, and indeed to the entire industry.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LABOUR LEGISLATION . .

(Central Office - BASLE, SWITZERLAND).

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